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ABSTRACT

The form of the print poetic line is partially determined by the expectations of the potential readers since authors, as participants in the common literary heritage of their culture, make use of the common expectations of that literary heritage. As a test of this hypothesis, one poem by James Dickey and one by Ted Olson were printed as prose, and 25 readers were asked to divide them into lines. Their expectations were then compared to the linear organization of the poems. Analysis of the results suggests that readers end lines at major syntactic breaks and that reader expectations and author practice show definite patterns of congruence. Dickey and his readers agree on the number of lines for the poem but disagree on where the lines should end; his line end choices, however, are predictable from the readers' expectations. Olson and his readers agree on the appropriate line ends, but his readers expect far more lines than he produces. His lines too are predictable from the readers' responses. The results, while not discounting rhythm as a significant feature in defining the poetic line, suggest that lines are definable, as poets generally agree; that poets' "energy" is the play between syntactic expectation and linear fulfillment; and that the reader takes part indirectly in poets' line end decisions. (Author/GW)

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Reader Expectations and the Poetic Line

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The line persists. Although Diane Wakoski says that poets are writing more prose like poems, and that the reverse is also true, thus implying less importance for the line and more importance for other features of poetic structure, nonetheless, she, as a practicing poet, continues to write "poems" in "lines." Before we can really judge the implications for the poetic line of Ms. Wakoski's statement, we must reconsider that tantalizing question: 'What is a line?" The question is of course not new, and poets and critics have been offering answers for years. Poets offer intuitional definitions. Sandra McPherson says "the line is a unit to work in. It is a compositional aid. A module of interest, surprise, or direction which offers itself as distinct from what precedes and follows."[1] John Haines says, "The decision to break lines at this or that point, to arrange them in whatever form or pattern, comes from the direction of the energy or impulse of the poet." He says further, "a line of poetry carries its justification as sound; we read it, hear it in a certain way."[2] Louis Simpson, verging on anarchism, says: "For writing to be read as a line of verse, all that is necessary is for the poet to indicate that they should be read so." He qualifies though: "The line is a unit of rhythm. The poet is moved by impulses of rhythm which he expresses in lines of verse."[3]

The institutional definition of the line reflects the persistent importance of rhythm and Simpson's anarchy. Geoffrey Leech, a linguist, quoting David Abercrombie, says: "a line is delimited by 'various devices which may be called line-end markers'...." and specifies these devices as rhyme, silent final stress, or a monosyllabic measure coinciding with the last syllable of the line. The lines thus marked contain "regular

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numbers of stresses or accents per line."[4] Samuel Levin agrees with Leech that rhythm defines the line when he says in "The Conventions of Poetry" that "obviously, the line has typographical identity.... Except possibly in free verse, however, the typographical groupings (and the concomitant pauses) are not random; some organizing principle must thus be at work behind them. This is the principle of meter."[5] Recognizing that meters are often "not in themselves transparent over the larger span" Levin posits line ends as marked with "some sort of sound-euphony--rhyme or assonance." Levin discounts the role of syntax, especially in blank verse. "In some meters, . . . none of these factors operate to define the line for the hearer. Moreover, syntax cannot be invoked for this purpose, because of caesura and enjambment."[6]

If meter or rhythm is the only defining factor, and if rhythm is an expression of the poet's "impulse" or "energy," we are left in the unenviable position of accepting lines of free verse as effectively random as Levin suggests, at least from the reader's perspective. Lines become simply the idiosyncratic whim of the artist, and the reader can recognize them only ex post facto as Simpson suggests. The free verse line should then be highly unpredictable. Readers should expect that lines will exist in a poem as one of the conventions of poetry, but should not be able to predict with any reasonable accuracy where line breaks will occur.

On the other hand, since readers expect lines, and writers do write them, it seems as reasonable to search for structural features which reader and poet share, even though those features may be unconsciously shared, as to assume unpredictability. That poets "feel," "intuit" a unity in line structure at least implies structure, which in turn implies defining features. Given the enormous variety of surface structure in lines, we should expect the definition to be quite complex, just as we expect the definition of a sentence to be complex. Since the definitions focus on

rhythm, we may best assume that rhythm is the key feature, although neither an isosyllabic not an isochronous rhythm, a rhythm based on surface phonetic features. Despite Levin's rejection, syntax could well be a primary factor in supporting rhythm as a feature which defines lines, a feature which reader and writer agree is important to poetry. Syntactic rhythm would be based on, grow out of, the interplay of sentence syntax and line syntax.

In seeking a definition of the line, we must consider too the point of view of the definer. Line definers generally focus on the poet and the poem, assuming that the reader processes, but has no hand in constructing the text. If we pay heed to the "reader response" advocates such as Bleich, Holland, Fish and others, we must accept a much more active role for the reader of literature than past critical theories have allowed. These response critics declare that reader and poet meet in the text with each bringing expectations, beliefs, viewpoints and communicative needs. The text, in this case a poem, is a part of a continuum with reader and writer at either end and the physical text the most obvious manifestation of a point on that continuum between reader and writer. The poet constructs the poem, but the reader reconstructs it on the basis of his own expectations. If we extend the notion of reader expectations along the continuum to the writer, we can hypothesize that readers' beliefs about the legitimate construction of a line influence the poet's practice in writing lines. This hypothesis reflects the reader response contention that readers are a part of the literary event, and offers an outside, nonauthorial dimension to defining the line. It incorporates as well, the persistent intuition of poets that the line is a unit, by assuming that the line is a structured entity, and therefore analyzable.

As a preliminary test of this hypothesis, twenty-five readers read two poems printed as prose from margin to margin and decided where line

breaks should occur. They knew that the poems were poems before they read them, but received no instructions other than to cut the prose form into lines. They did not rewrite the poems into the lines they chose, so did not visually see the typographic form of their versions of the poems nor did they have a chance to reconsider their choices. The readers were college students from a variety of disciplines, including the following: advertising, English, pre-law, political science, zoology, journalism, telecommunications, general business, communications, humanities. Only ten were English majors, and the number of English courses previously taken ranged from none to nine with an average of 3.6. Only one of the students claims or remembers having seen the poems before.

There are inherent disadvantages in asking naive readers to second guess a writer's choice of words, metaphors, lines or any portion of the structure of a creative work. Creativity is by nature highly individualistic so we should not expect readers to make the identical choices that the writer does. With respect to our concern with line divisions, we cannot reasonably expect the individual reader to reproduce the poet's individual lines, most especially if we accept Levin's, Leech's and others position that the sole governing feature of line structure is phoneticly based rhythm. Given a text, many rhythmic variations are possible. Furthermore, the readers in this study are novices ranged against accomplished poets, so we are on the face of it pitting sheep against wolves. Poets are practiced producers of poetry, whereas readers, even the best of them, are often only practiced receivers of poetry. If linguistic research tells us anything, it is that command of reception does not necessarily entail command of production, and marking line breaks is a productive process. We must also recognize that there may well be a visual correlate to the linguistic and conventional features of the line; that is a poet chooses a particular line because it "looks" right as well as or in spite

of sounding right. These readers were prevented from using the visual dimension, thus we introduce "visual error," and we make more difficult the reader's attempt to reproduce the poet's line breaks.

In order to minimize the variability of individual reading, and to approach a wider notion of reader, the twenty-five responses were tabulated into a single version of each poem, a composite reader response version. The procedure for constructing this composite version was as follows:

1. the percentage for each line break choice was tabulated;
2. the range, average, and median number of line breaks was tabulated;
3. starting with highest percentage line break choice and working down, lines were selected until a poem with the average number of line breaks was constructed.

The poems presented to the readers were James Dickey's "False Youth: Autumn: Clothes of the Age"[7] and Ted Olson's "Mending a Sidewalk...Making a Poem."[8] They were chosen in part because they are similar in subject matter and are both ametrical, so the readers could not depend on a metrical rhythm to decide on line breaks. The poems are dissimilar in their line structures and their sentence to line ratio. Dickey's original poem and composite version are Appendix A. Olson's original and composites are Appendix B.

The most apparent correspondence between Dickey's original and the composite is that the reader's version is only one line shorter than the original. Individual respondent line break choices range from a low of 17 to a high of 53, seventeen lines shorter to nineteen lines longer than the original; an interesting but most likely insignificant symmetry. Poet and composite audience are in close agreement on the average length of the line, perhaps then on the basic rhythmic flow of the poem. There is considerably less agreement on the precise structure of those lines. In particular, Dickey's original and his audience's composite version agree on only eight line breaks (22%), lines 4, 5, 19, 20, 23, 27, 30, and 35 in the original. The percentage of agreement

on these choices among the respondents ranges from 64% to 92% with lines 5, 19, 23, and 27 the highest with 80% or better agreement.

The remaining 27 lines in the original, 26 in the composite version, present an interesting pattern. The line breaks not in agreement with Dickey's choices, but with strong respondent preference are: joke, 92%; yet, 88%; hippie, 100%; hell, 92%; buddy, 96%; now, 92%; fox, 100%; walk, 92%; and word, 92%. Note that the respondents prefer a major syntactic break: joke completes the phrase starting with come; yet finishes a sentence, as do hippie, hell, buddy, now and fox. Walk completes the first segment of the but conjunction; and word completes the conjoined predicate starting with and. When we compare these choices with Dickey's, we see first that Dickey frustrates that expectation of a full line stop at a major syntactic break and chooses instead a line break at the nearest phrase or clause level break just below and to the left of the one chosen by the respondents. Dickey breaks at Brothers, leaving the prepositional phrase to the next line; at I, leaving and to hell for the next line; at hat, cutting off buddy; at softly, leaving the direct address for the next line; and at flying leaving the modifier where I walk for the next line. The cuts at jacket before yet, leaving a relative clause for the next line, and at hate before hippie, cutting the if clause off, do not follow this pattern so clearly because the clause level cut is very close to the sentence level cut chosen by the respondents. The cut at bird's before word follows the pattern "cut before the syntax is closed, fulfilled," but in doing so, Dickey cuts a phrase in two, that is cuts at a much lower level than in the rest of the series.

The pattern is continued, although less strongly, for cuts which the respondents agree on 80-90% of the time. In general, these cuts also show a preference for line ends which complete the syntax. Dickey, however, cuts at a lower syntactic break; for the 80-90% responses, that break separates a

prepositional phrase, except for one line. The respondent cuts are at Carolina, 80%; left, 84%; floor, 84%; grandson, 80%; out, 80%; and feathers, 80%. Dickey cuts at street before Carolina, can before left, face before floor, mother before grandson, and flying before feathers; in each case placing the prepositional phrase on the next line. The only exception is the cut between raveling and out, which, like the cut between bird's and word, breaks the details of the pattern but follows the underlying principle of the line breaks. Further analysis of line breaks on which there is less agreement by the respondents would not add measurably to the strength of the argument. I should point out that I have assumed that Dickey cut before the respondents' cuts, but it seems obvious that the cut can be read as after. The point of the pattern is not that Dickey frustrates by refusing to complete the syntax until the next line, or by continuing the line when the respondents indicate that they would like to see it finished. The point is rather that Dickey's line breaks do show a patterned variation against the expectations of the readers. The variation is too clearly a pattern to be simply random chance.

The readers' composite versions of Olson's poem, as compared to his original, reveal a different pattern of correspondence than Dickey's poem yielded. We should note before we begin, that Dickey's poem contains only six complex sentences cast into thirty six lines. Olson's poem contains thirty fairly short sentences arrayed over twenty five lines. The readers agreed with Dickey's decision on number of lines, but rather thought that Olson's poem should be thirty-six lines rather than twenty five. The range of choices is about the same as we found for Dickey's poem, a low of sixteen to a high of fifty-five. A preliminary conclusion could simply be that readers always pick approximately thirty six lines as the ideal for a poem, but I

think the conclusion rather hasty, although I would hesitate to discount it completely. Much research needs to be done. We can conclude that Dickey and the readers feel the balance between line and sentence syntax similarily. The readers and Olson are of different minds, however. For that reason, I give you two composite versions of Olson's poem, one which reflects the reader's average number of lines and one which reflects Olson's chosen number of lines. In the thirty-six line version, note that seventeen line breaks are the same as Olson's, that is nearly half of the line breaks chosen by the readers are identical to breaks chosen by Olson. In the twenty-five line version, the percentage, as we might expect, goes higher. Of the twenty-four line breaks in each poem, fifteen are the same, for an agreement of sixty percent. Although the readers and Olson do not agree on the basic flow of the rhythm of the poem, the balance between sentence and line, they do agree on the places where the flow is to be broken, which we did not find to be the case with Dickey.

That agreement is striking. First we must note that the readers continue to show their preference for a line end which is also a sentence break or a major clause break. No reader chooses a line break at think or don't; only one chooses formulas or ugly, and only six choose larrup or clogs. On the other hand, 100% agree with Olson on the choice of binder, yet and malleable; ninety-six percent agree with the choice of ruined, marry, to, boss and lustre; and ninety-two percent agree with the choice of work, it, sludge, and beginning. Of the twenty-four line breaks, the readers would choose the same ones for twelve lines at the rate of 92% agreement or better. It is worth noting, to round out the 15 identical line breaks, that quick has an 83% agreement and ingredients and experimenting are both 75%. We have then an interesting mirror image. Dickey and his readers choose the same number of lines, but are in wide apparent disagreement as to the appropriate place

to break the lines. Olson and the readers differ by twelve lines on the appropriate number for the poem, but agree quite closely on appropriate line breaks. The agreement is so close in fact that in the twenty-five line composite version, six of the lines are identical with the original, almost 25%.

The respondents' preferences for line breaks which do not match Olson's choices are predictable from the patterns we have seen so far. 96% prefer to break at right rather than formulas; 92% prefer sprinkle to out. 88% prefer cuss to larrup although 6 (25%) did choose larrup. Ugly received only one vote, as we noted. 92% choose caged over clogs, and 83% dociles over think and it over don't. The stanza starting with now caused a great deal of consternation for the readers. In the twenty-five line version, now to lustre is one line. In the longer version, the breaks are at polish, the second carefully and lustre. Within this section the choices are these with their percentages: polish, 71%; carefully$_1$, 42%; carefully$_2$, 58%; last, 38%; coarse and burlap, one vote each; and surface, 38%.

The high agreement between Olson's line breaks and his readers' results from an apparent agreement between Olson and readers that the most likely place to break a line is at a major syntactic juncture. The thirty-six line version, the readers' average number of lines, reflects the relatively large number of major syntactic junctures Olson builds into the poem. Clearly Olson chooses fewer breaks, and this may be explained in part by the visual dimension we excluded from this study. Note that Olson's poem is a visual block, wider than it is deep. Had the readers been able to see the poem resulting from their choices, they too may have reconsidered and chosen fewer breaks.

Readers then do have at least one expectation about the structure of lines, that being, at a first level of approximation, that lines

generally end at major syntactic breaks. The data bear this out. The corollary rule seems to be, if the line is too long after cutting at the major syntactic break, choose the next lowest syntactic juncture. This belief about line structure is probably not surprising to most creative writing teachers, and probably not to most literature teachers. However, assumption that this belief influences the poets writing to any significant degree clearly requires support, and the data do indeed support the hypothesis. The patterned correspondence between Dickey's original and the readers' composite version strongly supports the assumption that Dickey was aware of his audience's expectations when he wrote his poem. The correspondence between Olson's choices and his readers' clearly confirms the data from the Dickey poem. The hypothesis does not state or intend to imply that this influence of reader expectations on writer production is necessarily conscious or unconscious. It may well be one or the other or both at any given time.

The assumption of "adjustment to the reader," that the writer is responding to the reader, creating with the reader's expectations in mind suggests the new critics' "intentional fallacy." Perhaps it would be better to restate the hypothesis to say that the reader and writer share certain beliefs about the proper form of the poetic line, that one of these beliefs is that lines should generally end at or near a major syntactic juncture, and that the poet writes out of this tradition, and the reader reads out of it. That restatement may make some people more comfortable; it recasts the focus and allows us to assume that the writer is writing for himself, not for his audience, but it still implies that the reader and writer share a common belief about the proper form of the poetic line and that the poet composes with that belief in mind. However, the data from these two poems does not support the notion that the writer is totally free in his choices.

I do not wish to argue here that the writer cannot be free. It is certainly easy to conceive of an author composing a poem, then randomly selecting line breaks, say by drawing words in the poem out of a hat. There are many experimental poems around that reconceive the poetic line. I would maintain that these data, limited though they are, suggest strongly that there is a set of defining features, one of which is based on syntactic structure, and that those engaging in the literary event "reading and writing poetry" generally adhere to those defining features.

If we now reconsider our opening definitions of the line, we can perhaps gain a new synthesis. I think we must reject the institutional definition that insists that lines can be defined only in terms of syllable count or other measures of surface phonetic regularity and the suggestion that anything else is random or unpredictably idiosyncratic. Syntactic structure is a defining feature of the line, but the precise role it plays needs to be explored. As we might expect, the poets' "intuitional" definitions come close to the mark. "Impulse" and "energy," "rhythm" all seem to be ways of coping with, explaining the intuitional awareness of the guiding force of the syntax. Lines growing out of long sentences broken into many lines reflect lower syntactic cuts, hence a different "energy" than short sentences cut into longer lines. We see that difference in the poems presented here. More possible syntactic cuts at sentence final position will induce the reader to expect more cuts, more lines, whether or not the poet chooses to fulfill that expectation. Fewer sentence final positions induce the reader to suspend expectations, to look for lower level cuts. Clearly, the different choices are guided by the syntax the writer chooses, and the writer must choose a syntax that allows the rhythm of reading that he desires. The rhythm of reading is that of syntactic fulfillment or suspension; the rhythm is that of voice, inner or outer, balancing eye: that of writer-voice balancing reader-voice.

NOTES

[1] "The Working Line," Field, 8 (Spring, 1973), p. 54.

[2] "Further Reflections on Line and the Poetic Voice," Field, 9 (Fall, 1973), pp. 80-81.

[3] "Two Responses to 'The Working Line'." Field, 8 (Spring, 1973), pp. 64-65.

[4] A Linguistic Guide to English Poetry, London: Longman Group Limited, 1969, p. 114

[5] Literary Style: A Symposium, New York; Oxford University Press, 1971, p. 181.

[6] Levin, p. 182.

[7] The Atlantic Monthly, 228, No. 5 (Nov. 1971), p.67.

[8] Saturday Review, (November 27, 1971), p. 33.

Appendix A

FALSE YOUTH:
AUTUMN:
CLOTHES OF THE AGE
For Susan Tuckerman Dickey

By James Dickey

Three red foxes on my head, come down
There last Christmas from Brooks Brothers
As a joke, I wander down Harden Street
In Columbia, South Carolina, fur-haired and bald,
Looking for impulse in camera stores and red-neck greeting cards.
A pole is spinning
Colors I have little use for, but I go in
Anyway, and take off my fox hat and jacket
They have not seen from behind yet. The barber does what he can
With what I have left, and I hear the end man say, as my own
Hair-cutter turns my face
To the floor, Jesus, if there's anything I hate
It's a middle-aged hippie. Well, so do I, I swallow
Back: so do I so do I
And to hell. I get up, and somebody else says
When're you gonna put on that hat,
Buddy? Right now. Another says softly
Good-bye, Fox. I arm my denim jacket
On and walk to the door, stopping for the murmur of chairs,
And there it is
hand-stitched by the needles of the mother
Of my grandson eagle riding on his claws with a banner
Outstretched as the wings of my shoulders,
Coming after me with his flag
Disintegrating, his one eye raveling
Out, filthy strings flying
From the white feathers, one wing nearly gone:
Blind eagle but flying
Where I walk, where I stop with my fox
Head at the glass to let the row of chairs spell it out
And get a lifetime look at my bird's
One word, raggedly blazing with extinction and soaring loose
In red threads burning up white until I am shot in the back
Through my wings or ripped apart
For rags:

Poetry.

False Youth: Respondents composite version

Three red foxes on my head,
Come down there last Christmas from Broo[illegible]ners as a joke,
I wander down Harden Street in Columbia, S[illegible] Carolina,
Fur-haired and bald,
Looking for impluse in camera stores and red-neck greeting cards.
A pole is spinning colors I have little use for,
But I go in anyway,
And take off my fox hand and jacket they have not see from behind yet.
The barber does what he can with what I have left,
And I hear the end man say,
As my own hair-cutter turns my face to the floor,
Jesus, if there's anything I hate it's a middle-aged hippie.
Well, so do I, I swallow back:
So do I, so do I and to hell.
I get up, and somebody else says when're you gonna put on that hat, buddy?
Right now.
Another says softly good-bye, Fox.
I arm my denim jacket on and walk to the door,
Stopping for the murmur of chairs,
And there it is
Hand-stitched by the needles of the mother of my grandson
Eagle riding on his claws with a banner outstretched as the wings of my shoulders,
Coming after me with his flag disintegrating,
His one eye raveling out,
Filthy strings flying from the white feathers,
One wing nearly gone:
Blind eagle but flying where I walk,
Where I stop with my fox head at the glass
To let the row of chairs spell it out
And get a lifetime look at my bird's one word,
Raggedly blazing with extinction
And soaring loose in red threads burning up white
Until I am shot in the back through my wings
Or ripped apart for rags:
<u>Poetry</u>.

Appendix B

Mending a Sidewalk. . .Making a Poem

By Ted Olson

It's simple in theory. Just three ingredients:
Something solid, something fluid, some sort of binder.
The mix, though, must be right. The formulas
never quite fit. You keep experimenting:
a cupful, a fistful, a sprinkle. But look out:
a slosh too much and it's ruined.

Now to work
They're refractory. They sulk. They don't want to marry.
You thwack, pummel, flail, churn, larrup,
and cuss. You're tempted to say the hell with it.
But somehow finally they cohere, into an ugly
coarse gray sludge.

And that's just the beginning.
The stuff doesn't like being caged. It clots, clogs,
spills over, goes whereever it isn't supposed to.
Matter's contrary. You've got to show it you're boss.
And slowly, ever so slowly, it dociles. You think
By golly, I've got it! But you haven't. Not yet.
It has to jell. Don't try to hurry it. But don't
wait too long. Catch it while it's malleable.

Now to groom and polish. Carefully. . .carefully. . .
until at last the coarse gray-burlap surface
takes on grain and lustre.

Stop, now, quick!

Don't let it get too slick.

Mending: Respondents' composite version with average number of lines.

It's simple in theory.
Just three ingredients:
Something solid, something fluid, some sort of binder.
The mix,though must be right.
The formulas never quite fit.
You keep experimenting:
A cupful, a fistful, a sprinkle.
But look out:
A slosh too much and its ruined.
Now to work.
They're refractory.
They sulk.
They don't want to marry.
You thwack, pummel, flail, churn, larrup, and cuss.
You're tempted to say the hell with it.
But somehow finally they cohere,
Into an ugly coarse gray sludge.
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The stuff doesn't like being caged.
It clots, clogs, spills over,
Goes whereever it isn't supposed to.
Matter's contrary.
You've got to show it you're boss.
And slowly, ever so slowly,
It dociles.
You think by golly, I've got it!
But you haven't
Not yet.
It has to jell.
Don't try to hurry it.
But don't wait too long.
Catch it while it's malleable.
Now to groom and polish.
Carefully. . .carefully. . .
Until at last the coarse gray-burlap surface takes on grain and lustre.

Stop, now, quick.
Don't let it get too slick.

Mending: Respondents' composite version with same number of lines as the original.

It's simple in theory.
Just three ingredients:
Something solid, something fluid, some sort of binder.
The mix, though, must be right.
The formulas never quite fit.
You keep experimenting:
A cupful, a fistful, a spinkle.
But look out: a slosh too much and it's ruined.
Now to work.
They're refractory. They sulk. They don't want to marry.
You thwack, pummel, flail, churn, larrup, and cuss.
You're tempted to say the hell with it.
But somehow finally they cohere, into an ugly coarse gray sludge.
And that's just the beginning.
The stuff doesn't like being caged.
It clots, clogs, spills over, goes wherever it isn't supposed to.
Matter's contrary.
You've got to show it you're boss.
And slowly, ever so slowly, it dociles.
You think by golly, I've got it: But you haven't. Not yet.
It has to jell. Don't try to hurry it.
But don't wait too long.
Catch it while it's malleable.
Now to groom and polish. Carefully. . .carefully. . .until at last the coarse gray-burlap surface takes on grain and lustre.
Stop, now, quick!
Don't let it get too slick.